

Understanding the different types of UGC participants and social context for fashion brands: insights from social media platforms

Abstract
Purpose

The study looks at the types of social media participants through user-generated content (UGC) and how this leads to brand engagement in a fashion retail context. In doing so, it explores the effects of social context of brand-related content on other social media users, which promotes socially influenced consumer brand engagement (SICBE) in social media settings.

Method

The study postulates the existence of social realities as consistent with social constructivism, with multiple realities of social influence outlined on the basis of ontological relativism. To fulfil the proposed research objectives, research data were gathered from professional and social participants based on specific inclusion criteria, purposive sampling technique and a semi-structured interview method.

Findings

Findings highlighted various types of UGC participants with differing objectives in their use of UGC; these participant types are passive, creators, critics and collectors/consumers. The study uncovered many social context that can increase the effectiveness of UGC. The social context is explored through social trust, Fashion UGC expertise, and relevance. These UGC participants and social context can foster SICBE in a fashion retail context.

Originality

This study proposes a holistic framework which highlighted the role of UGC participants and social context can foster SICBE in a fashion retail context.

Nomenclature: UGC: user-generated content; SICBE: socially influenced consumer brand engagement; SMUs: social media users.

Keywords: UGC participants, relevance, passive, creators, critics, and collectors/consumers.

Introduction

Social media are platforms that enable people to socialise in virtual environments; social media users (SMUs) tend to discuss what is important to them, which may include their experiences with different brands (Laroche et al., 2012; Singh and Sonnenburg, 2012). According to Tsai and Men (2017, p. 3), “*social media communication is not only interactive but also participatory, collaborative, personal, and simultaneously communal, which provides an avenue for firms to engage with customers and build ‘meaningful relationships’*”. Individuals’ or groups’ discussions on social media of their personal interests can create social influence for brands (Hollebeek, 2011; Nyadzayo et al., 2020). Social interactions and networking on social media influence consumers’ purchasing decisions (Wadera and Sharma, 2018; Priya, 2017; Park and Kim, 2014). In particular, SMUs can persuade other SMUs to purchase specific fashion brands (Bhatia, 2019; Pookulangara and Shephard, 2013; Frick et al., 2020). There are countless fashion-conscious people who have an online presence on social media. Fashion brands reflect a person’s social and economic status (Jain and Khan, 2017) and fashion consumers are influenced by the social and economic classes of others on social media (Esteban et al., 2018). Fashion consumers are influenced by their close social network on social media platforms. Fashion is also communication (Valaei and Nikhashemi, 2017) and is related to ethnicity (Jain et al., 2015). Social influence, in terms of buying fashion products and fashion brand selection, is based on cultural background (Li et al., 2012). Although there are studies on fashion brands (Cao et al., 2020; Giakoumaki and Krepapa, 2020; Grassi, 2020; Nyadzayo et al., 2020), there is limited understanding regarding which social influencers enhance socially influenced buying decisions for fashion brands.

Consumer engagement is defined as cognitive, emotional and behavioural related aspects that can build buying intention for brands (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 152). The concept of consumer brand engagement does not focus on social aspects and context,

such as social networking and social interactions that can enhance social brand engagement using social media platforms (Osei-Frimpong and McLean, 2018; Osei-Frimpong, 2019). Hollebeek (2011) argued that social interaction should be regarded as the step before consumer brand engagement, in that it provides the foundation for consumer brand engagement. Social and consumer engagement in relation to brands is now regarded less as a static phenomenon and more as a dynamic concept involving multiple layers. There is still no consensus on a comprehensive definition of consumer and social engagement because the context of engagement is subjective due to differing psychological and social circumstances (Leeflang et al., 2011; Brodie et al., 2011). Most previous literature explored and understood social brand engagement (Kozinets, 2014; Osei-Frimpong, 2019) and consumer brand engagement separately (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Gómez et al., 2019; Xi and Hamari, 2020). So, this study is focused on the integration of both social and consumer brand engagement. Socially influenced consumer brand engagement (SICBE) can be defined as the creation, connection and communication of a brand's story between consumers and a firm utilising brand-related images, language and meanings through social media platforms with the purpose to develop socially influenced purchase decisions of fashion brands. SICBE represents a social act in the absence of boundaries in which the participants create social influence through social interactions that can encourage other SMUs to get more information through social networks to take an optimal buying decision (Hollebeek et al., 2014; Osei-Frimpong and McLean, 2018; Osei-Frimpong, 2019). Prior research on brand engagement highlighted that there is a need to determine which particular SMUs enhance social interactions and networking with the purpose to motivate other SMUs to take buying decisions about brands (Osei-Frimpong and McLean, 2018; Osei-Frimpong, 2019).

Some scholars have stated that social media and fashion brands have become necessary parts of people's routine lives (Kong et al., 2021). According to Calefato (2021), fashion contrasts with other products as the success of such products can be dictated by the influence of celebrities and by culture. Fashion is also shaped by social circles, by creativity, and by cultures. Some studies suggest that fashion branding is different from other products as fashion lovers want to influence others through new trends, style, and fashion waves. Social media helps such stakeholders to share new fashion trends by

enabling visualization, sharing, and following (Lee et al., 2018; Naeem and Ozuem, 2021b). Fashion lovers enjoy engaging with social influencers, and social media can promote new fashion trends, styles, and waves (Calefato, 2021; Naeem and Ozuem, 2021b). Social media helps to promote the appeal of aspirational lifestyles, leading to motivations and a general increase to buying propensity when it comes to fashion brands (Wu et al., 2015). By following social media trends, fashion brand lovers can decide whether these trends suit their social, economic, and personality needs (Calefato, 2021; Naeem and Ozuem, 2021b). The present study is focused on social media and fashion brands in the context of social engagement, and buying decisions related to fashion brands.

User-generated content (UGC) does not exert the same social influence on different social media friends because trust and social ties differ among different friends (Sparks et al., 2013). According to Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011), UGC created by close friends was trusted more than the UGC of others. Some studies highlighted that people usually give more weight to topics, purchasing suggestions and recommendations that are suggested by their close social network (McKeown and Shearer, 2019; Naeem and Ozuem, 2021a; Park and Lin, 2020). Further, Lee and Choeh (2018) indicated that the social effectiveness of UGC is strongly influenced by close social ties. Some SMUs exert more social influence on others because they are known as opinion leaders; opinion leaders help to generate social engagement (Ladhari et al., 2020) but are not enough to generate purchase behaviour. Most of these studies were conducted to explore the impact of UGC on corporate mobile media (Neal and Ross, 2018), travelling and planning (Tsiakali, 2018; Mendes-Filho et al., 2018), and advertisement tools on television shows (Viswanathan et al., 2018). However, less attention has been paid to uncovering the role of UGC as a social influence tool in the context of the UK fashion industry.

It is important to uncover how social influence can help generate brand-related UGC as well as improve motivation, interest and purchase intention (Naeem and Ozuem, 2020; Osei-Frimpong and McLean, 2018; Osei-Frimpong, 2019). This research provides in-depth understanding of how the social influence of UGC through social media develops into SICBE. In order to contribute to this discovery, the current study provides a guide on

how to manage the social influence of UGC on social media to create SICBE for fashion brands within the UK. As the major focus of this research is to explore the social influence of UGC and its impact on SICBE, there is a need to understand the UGC and social context on social media where the social influence occurred. Limited research has been carried out to understand what are the most influential social context that can enhance socially influenced consumer fashion brand engagement. Previous studies did not consider types of UGC participants with respect to the creation, sharing and exchange of UGC. Therefore, there is a need to understand why some SMUs strongly respond to specific UGC and why SMUs react differently when they receive UGC from different sources on social media platforms. This study extends our understanding regarding the specific social context that can develop and enhance socially influenced fashion brand engagement. Furthermore, this study also contributes by specifying which types of UGC participants on social media can generate and enhance socially influenced fashion brand engagement. The findings of this study can provide guidance to fashion brands managers on how they can generate and socially influence the purchase intention of SMUs for fashion brands. This study intends to address two research objectives:

RO1: Understanding the social context on social media that can develop SICBE for fashion brands.

RO2: Exploring the different types of UGC participants that can develop SICBE for fashion brands.

Literature Review

Phua et al. (2017) and Loureiro et al. (2018) used social comparison theory to evaluate how individual vanity and social influence affect the passion of consumers to buy fashion products. Chae (2017) and Eom et al. (2019) argued that the advent and rise of social media has increased social comparison, as more people want to look attractive; people upload pictures of themselves wearing fashion brands to show their social status and create influence in their networks. However, social comparison also raises the potential for bias, it affects the maintenance of self-esteem, and can lead to a desire to look more attractive. Social comparison in fact promotes the comparison of selfie culture and social

status (Chae, 2017; Eom et al., 2019). The wearing of fashion brands is an example of people who are involved in social comparison: they want to look upwards rather than downwards. According to Jin et al. (2019) and Lu et al. (2016), social presence theory can be used to understand how social media has created the ability to interact with others to exchange relevant information. Osei-Frimpong et al. (2018) used social presence theory to test the social effects of brand presence on social media that generated brand engagement. However, little is understood about how UGC exerts a social influence on other SMUs. Such an understanding could better illuminate the nature of SICBE that is voluntarily created on social media.

The study supports the view that *“social media empowers consumers to share their views and exert their individual and collective influence on other consumers as well as on brands”* (Kim and Johnson, 2016, p1). Kim and Johnson (2016) examined only the positive influence of UGC on brands, whereas futures studies can explain both the positive and negative influence of UGC. Therefore, the present study explores the reasons why social media users like to share negative reviews, and it examines how these can influence social engagement and buying decisions. A recent study highlighted that UGC comprises of interactive, cognitive, emotional, relation, and visual engagement, and these can influence intentions to purchase fashion brands (Vazquez et al., 2020). However, this study did not provide any understanding as to which of these aspects are socially ‘trustable’ sources that can generate interactive engagement and positive emotions towards buying fashion brands (Vazquez et al., 2020). Luca (2015) highlighted that blogs, discussions, crowdfunding, social sharing, comments, videos, reviews, networking, pictures and updates are popular types of UGC. Companies must understand which UGC are trusted by the majority (Luca, 2015). The present study therefore identifies which sources of socially generated UGC are most trusted by those that buy fashion brands.

The advent and rise of social media have created greater social presence as people can post comments, upload audio and upload high-quality video with facial expressions (Jin et al., 2019; Lim et al., 2015). However, social comparison and social presence theories only provide some understanding regarding why people generate content through social

media. These theories do not explain why some SMUs are influenced by social influencers whereas others are influenced by close friends. This suggests that both theories are not sufficient to explore how the social influence of UGC among SMUs develops into SICBE. According to self-determination theory, *“authenticity involves an individual's engagement in intrinsically motivated behaviours—those that emanate from a person's innate desires and passions”* (Audrezet et al., 2018, p. 3). Self-determination theory focuses on an individual's motivation and choices (Ki and Kim, 2016). Self-determination theory is unable to provide any understanding with respect to why people generate UGC and how people are influenced by it. Further, it sheds no light on which external social sources can influence the purchase behaviour of SMUs. Therefore, the present study utilises social influence theory because it can provide an understanding of the importance of social context that can engage SMUs in the creation, exchange and use of UGC through social media platforms. Furthermore, social influence theory also provides an understanding of how SMUs are influenced by individual sources and groups. It identified the specific sources that can lead towards SICBE.

The pursuit of online social interactions on social media websites also leads to the sharing of information, social referrals (Becker-Leifhold, 2018), product recommendations (Ananda et al., 2019) and the sharing of one's own engagement with brands (Kumar and Nayak, 2019). These variables can create social influence across social networks (Heinonen, 2011). The intensity of social influence depends on many factors, which might include culture and gender, and relationships and trust between social network members (Godey et al., 2016; Hudson et al., 2016). The study of Kelman (1958) introduced the concept of social influence through social influence theory that can be understood through three sub-types: identification, internalisation and compliance. Identification takes place when the views of others are adopted by an individual, which results in trust (Jin and Ryu, 2019). Compliance takes place when an individual conforms to others' beliefs without agreeing or disagreeing with the validity of their statement(s) (Jin and Ryu, 2019). Internalisation takes place when the opinions of peers are adopted in order to share the same values and be part of the group (Jin and Ryu, 2019). When social influence leads to sales or brand engagement, then it can be stated that social influence has taken place

regarding a specific brand (Kumar et al., 2018). Compliance occurs when a SMU accepts influence because he/she expects to achieve the same brand advantage.

Consumers' buying behaviour in terms of fashion products differs from their purchasing behaviour for automobiles and books, or booking airline tickets (Jung et al., 2014). Moreover, consumers' purchases of non-cultural products are made on the basis of their psychological involvement, whereas fashion products are bought on the basis of social interaction (Cook and Yurchisin, 2017), social status (Esteban et al., 2018) and communication (Becker, 2018). That is why fashion consumers tend to socially influence the creation and consumption of UGC in a way that varies from other products. O'Cass (2004) defined fashion clothing involvement as "*the extent to which a consumer views the related fashion [clothing] activities as a central part of their life*". The literature does not provide a comprehensive framework through which the social involvement of UGC in the high-street fashion industry of the UK can be increased with respect to the social context of UGC. Factors such as trust and social motivation can develop and increase SICBE. Therefore, this research explores the social context of UGC among SMUs. In this regard, this study explores which types of UGC participants on social media, as well as how the social influence of UGC, motivates users to generate more UGC. This research therefore explores the role of UGC in creating SICBE for fashion brands on social media. The current study focuses on explaining how the fundamentals of social influence theory are applicable in the context of SICBE on social media platforms. In this way, this study intends to make a contribution to business practices, theory and existing literature through improving understanding of the social creation, consumption, interaction and social influence of UGC interaction that can develop into SICBE.

Research Methodology

Population and sampling

In the UK, fashion is the leading creative industry, and it makes a significant contribution to the UK economy. For example, ASOS (ASC.L), a fashion brand leader of the UK, earned over £86 (US\$ 113) every second of every day in 2019 (Fenton, 2020). Furthermore, the N Brown group (BWNG.L), a fast fashion leader in the UK, earned more than £29 during every second of every day in 2019 (Fenton, 2020). There are many

fashion brands (apparel, footwear, bags and accessories) which earned the highest revenue and profit in 2019 in the UK. The literature highlights the importance of fashion brands (Cao et al., 2020; Giakoumaki and Krepapa, 2020; Grassi, 2020; Nyadzayo et al., 2020) but does not provide understanding about the UGC participants and social context through social media that can develop into SICBE for fashion brands.

Statista (2020) has recognised UK as top third world fashion brand leader and revenue generator (US\$ 34,854m) in the year of 2020. Statista (2020) also recognised that the UK apparel industry is more than 60% revenue earner in 2020 as compared to other fashion brands (apparel, footwear, bags and accessories); therefore, this study has targeted the top five brands of the UK fashion apparel industry: KJ's Laundry, The Place, Levi's, Browns Fashion, and Matches Fashion. These fashion brands were selected because they have extensive presence and following among the people of the UK through social media platforms. These brands have official online pages, especially on Facebook and Twitter, and they are actively involved in generating and sharing content for fashion brands. This study has only targeted the customers of these brands; therefore, this study generally targeted customers of these brands across all social media platforms.

Patton (1990) suggested that defined inclusion and exclusion criteria ensure that information-rich cases are selected. Patton (1990) suggested that there is no universal rule of thumb with respect to determining the correct sample size using qualitative data collection and analysis methods. Cohen et al. (2011) indicated that research can be legitimate even though the sample size is small; they argued that the researcher can finish collecting data when different categories reach a saturation point. Categories saturate when the collection of data no longer returns new information or insights into the subject matter (Smith, 2010). Therefore, it is not possible to assess the final number of interviews that are required in advance as saturation needs to be achieved. Saunders et al. (2016) observed that, on average, 30 participants were chosen for qualitative surveys in different qualitative studies. They observed that this number of participants could be regarded as sufficient to achieve legitimate research (Walliman, 2018). The sample size in the current study comprised 32 professional and social participants who took part in in-depth

interviews. The demographic features of the selected consumers are given (See appendix 1).

It has found that most of content creators and critics are young as well as having maximum level of education from selected respondents therefore they are more involved to exchange information related to brands. The participants have been asked about which social networking platforms they commonly used for their purposes. It has found that creator are young people who are actively used most of the social media platforms while passive is limited to few most famous social media platforms only.

Using purposive sampling, this study targeted SMUs who are active on the official social media pages of the selected fashion brands. These fashion brand consumers were initially located through the comments and postings on the selected fashion apparel brands on social media platforms. This study is only focused on consumers of apparel fashion brands because the major objectives are to gain understanding about the types of UGC participants and social context that can develop into SICBE. These consumers of fashion brands were initially contacted through their social media accounts to arrange times for interviews. These participants actively generate, exchange or consume fashion brand-related content on social media platforms. According to Aslam et al. (2018) and Naeem and Ozuem (2021c), the selection of participants of different ages and backgrounds, and users of different social media platforms, can offer richer and more in-depth understanding about a particular phenomenon. Therefore, this study targeted participants who are students, homemakers, carers, office workers, business owners and professionals. The main selection criteria were: they should be over 18 years of age, knowledgeable about selected brands, frequently use social media platforms and ready to provide data voluntarily.

Instrument

The selection of data collection methods deployed using an exploratory research design must suit the purpose and objective of the study (DeVault, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2013). In qualitative studies, focus groups, semi-structured interviews and observations are commonly used, particularly in recent marketing studies (Azemi et al., 2019, 2020). This

study used semi-structured interviews since this method supports researchers who aim to develop a research framework using inductive reasoning with little available information. Fellows and Liu (2015) suggest limiting interviews to no more than one hour to maintain concentration levels. Therefore, interview sessions for this study lasted between 40 and 50 minutes in duration. The researchers asked for permission to both record the interviews, and to take key notes to later transcribe for thematic analysis. The interview questions (See appendix 2). were designed for analytical purposes so that each question related to a research question, as suggested by Willig et al. (2017). The researchers were involved throughout the interviews with the purpose of understanding, transcribing and interpreting the various social, local and cultural meanings.

Thematic analysis

The study of Braun and Clarke (2006) highlighted that thematic analysis has become the best qualitative data analysis method for getting in-depth and valuable insights. Successive interviews require retrieving valuable insights iteratively. For this purpose, the researchers closely examined interview transcripts and undertook initial analysis immediately after conducting the interviews. Initially, the authors of the present study conducted nine interviews with the purpose to learn more and improve the wording of the interview questions as per proposed objectives. Afterwards, the researchers collected data from 32 interviewees and used NVivo software that can facilitate the extraction of meaningful results. The study of Braun and Clarke (2006) highlighted that thematic analysis can offer thick descriptions and valuable insights through the use of codes, main themes and keywords. Figures 1 provides detailed descriptions of codes, main themes and keywords and how these were used to develop a research framework for this study.

Major theme 1: UGC participants

Subtheme 1: Passive

Keywords: unable to write, guidance from friends, direct communication, inactive user, trolls, insults, shy.

A passive type of social networking member may be influenced by brand-related content, but they do not actively reply, create or participate in any discussion. Those SMUs who have a high level of trust in direct communication seem passive. In the passive category, people are less likely to share and pass comments on the shared UGC. However, it does not mean they never share or like the content, it means they are less actively involved in sharing and participating in discussion. For instance, a 45-year-old housewife said, *"I have social media accounts and am able to read information on Facebook and Twitter. But I am **unable to write** to ask for information related to brands in which I am interested. **My friends** who have good awareness regarding which apparel brand is best and offered, sometimes share information on WhatsApp group which is significant and helpful to make a purchase decision"*. Some respondents highlighted that they had poor writing skills. One of the participants was afraid of trolling, and insults because of her poor writing skills. A 33-year-old housewife said *"I am also an active member, but I am not a good searcher and writer to do search or to write on social media. I often feel shy to write freely because people are involved in **trolls and insults**"*.

Similarly, a 33-year-old housewife also provide detail, *"I can read brand comments that attract, but I have trust in **direct communication** that comes from friends, and I am **not an active user** on social media"*. Homemakers have responsibilities at home and with their children, which limits their involvement in creating and exchanging brand-related content. It was also found that some participants were too shy to create and exchange UGC, especially in the context of online social media groups. A 33-year-old mother noted: *"Sometimes I feel **shy** to share my experience because I have not perfect writing skills and, as a busy housewife, I also have little time to post this in Facebook and WhatsApp groups"*. This type of social networking member may be influenced by brand-related content, but they do not actively reply, create or participate in any discussion related to fashion brands.

Subtheme 2: Content creators

Keywords: profession, positive/negative, experience, influencer, knowledge, right decision, best deals, personal pictures.

Content creators are SMUs who create, share or exchange fashion brand-related content. People (participants and known persons from their social network) shared that their

shared messages are also shared by others and ultimately this increases the exchange of information as well as engagement with brands. The first group of participants shared that people know their professions and knowledge therefore they are known as strong influencers for brand buying. For example, a 31-year-old male marketing consultant said, “*due to my **profession**, I am known as a strong influencer and socially responsible; a person who explains the **positive/negative** of brands for right buying through social media*”. Similarly, a 46-year-old professional man said, “*I worked a few years with famous brands, so my links want to share my **personal experience** for selection of brands; I believe my sharing helps others make the **right decision***”. The second group of participants shared that they joined social media groups where close and other people frequently create posts, which increases the level of information exchange and helps with buying decisions. A 25-year-old female student explained why she is motivated to exchange fashion brand-related content: “*I always really love to share pictures, videos or content related to brands with my friends, friends of friends, family members and online local community on Facebook. Most of the time, I am the first person to share useful information with others and people acknowledge and appreciate my efforts. Whenever I post material, people love to share my brand experiences regarding whether that apparel brand is worth buying or not. Based on this exchange of information, we are in the **best position to decide** whether we buy that brand or not*”.

Many participants were involved in information exchanges, such as creating, and receiving posts based on their personal experiences. These exchanges related to the fashion brands that they really liked personally, and which others liked within their social networks. A 35-year-old housewife described her experiences on social networking sites as follows: “*we have a common family group on Facebook and WhatsApp. Many times, family members exchange information about what they wear (clothes and shoes) to social events. Sometimes, I also create content to share with others about which famous brands are on sale, at discounted prices, or what the **best deals** are in local stores. Sometimes we share content which is mostly liked and accepted by the crowd on social media. In my opinion, our common group plays an important role because all the sources are credible, and their shared experiences are without vested interests, or they are to help each other. Sometimes, unconsciously, I purchase shoes and jeans when my cousin shares her **personal pictures** in which she looked stunning*”. Some participants highlighted that they are actively involved in sharing pictures, videos or

content related to brands with friends, friends of friends, family members and online local communities on Facebook.

Subtheme 3: Content critic

Keywords: sub-standard, time and money, worst buy, boxing day sale, worst use experience, promise.

Content critics are customers who were dissatisfied with the product or service they received in comparison to what a brand promised before they purchased it. The critics are those individuals who are frustrated or furious about brands (e.g., brand quality, price, complaint-handling procedures, differences between information shared and what customers experienced, and customer services). For example, a 33-year-old male business owner said, *“On Black Friday and Boxing Day, I always notice that I am unable to get jeans and shoes after wasting a whole day queueing. When I successfully purchase a single item then I find that the quality of the brand is **sub-standard** compared to what is sold on regular days. I share these experiences with all local community members through social media so that they can save their **time and money**”*. Similarly, a 45-year-old housewife said, *“once I purchased a brand from discounted sales, unfortunately it was the **worst buy**, so I told my friends to avoid its buying”*.

Critics are not the same as content creators, in the sense that critics create posts to share their own stories about disheartening experiences, whereas content creators do not specifically share disheartening experiences, but rather create content based around unique shopping experiences (i.e., satisfied, emotional attachment, and recommend) and expertise about specific brands which have made them strong influencers in their social networks. A 47-year-old female IT professional worker stated: *“The previous year I purchased a well-known brand in the **Boxing Day sale**, but it was the **worst use experience**, so I warned others to save money and time”*.

Critics, in this sense, are those who have purchase receipts, correspondence emails, pictures of clothes and shoes, and logical reasons which can demotivate existing and future consumers. A 24-year-old housewife described the motivational role of discounted sales for her, and others around her: *“I purchased jeans at discounted prices from a top*

apparel brand, but these jeans did not perform compared to was **promised** in the advertisement. After four months, the colour had faded, and they became uncomfortable to wear. Luckily, that brand – again - offered the same deal, with the same promise as well as discounted prices. I took this chance... Then I took pictures, uploaded them to the advertisement, and shared my experience so that people could **compare what was promised**, and what was delivered. Many people appreciated my post and remarked that I had saved them money. I also shared my post many times to draw attention to the company, and to help people. I tried to contact the company, but they did not cooperate as given in words in the advertisement”.

Subtheme 4: Content consumers/collectors

Keywords: sources for updates, promotional information, different groups, attachment, interests, engagement, awareness, responsiveness.

Content consumers or collectors are interested in organising and aggregating brand-related content. After doing this they can share it with friends and other SMUs, or they can use it for their personal purposes. This type of participant is not only interested in UGC but is also actively involved in sharing it with others. A 28-year-old male student said, “I follow the official pages of my favourite brands on Facebook, Twitter and on YouTube. I subscribe to these **sources for updates, promotional information**, and to view new trends or deals. Whenever I receive information which I think may be attractive, I also share it with my friends, family members and others”. A 33-year-old male office worker had the following point of view: “I think Facebook and Instagram are becoming part of my life because whenever I need them, I can get all the information (I need) related to my interests by joining **different groups and communities**. You know people recommend jobs, brand sales, and everything related to everyone’s lives. I try to persuade my friends and family members to join, and gradually, through these social networking platforms, they gain **attachment and other interests**”.

Fashion lovers gather and assemble knowledge related to fashion brands by following purchasing apps as well as social media platform marketing tools (i.e., sponsored ads, official pages on social media, advertisement ads and other updates). A 27-year-old housewife noted: “I am a member of different social networking sites like.... Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp. Sometimes, I visit these networking sites to capture information related

to my interest. Many times, people recommend amazing and good clothing deals to others, but I also benefit from a lot of the information, and I buy items I require for myself and my family at **economical prices**. I am confident that these social networking sites enhance our **engagement** as well as our purchase decisions". They participate in sharing information, such as online deals, discounted prices, special offers and other benefits. In the context of what inspires social media users to exchange fashion brand-related content on social networking platforms, a 35-year-old male business consultant stated: "Live chat facilities on Facebook and WhatsApp have created more **brand awareness and responsiveness** in the apparel industry. Most of the time my favourite brand shares brand-related content on social media, and on my mobile sim regarding what brand new features or services they have introduced. I collect and share that information with others. I'm also impressed that the staff of my favourite fashion brand on Facebook are so quick to help customers, responding to enquiries in no time. They address most problems at the earliest opportunity. Therefore, many friends and crowds share positive word of mouth on Facebook groups about this brand".

Major theme 2: Social context

Subtheme 1: Social trust

Keywords: friends' recommendations, true friends, family, paid influencers, trust, experienced the product.

Fashion brand consumers usually show higher trust in information from family members and close friends than brand channels. It was found that fashion brand related UGC created by close friends and family members was trusted more than the UGC of others. These close sources can generate more social influence and the credibility of information is important for SMUs when taking fashion brand buying decisions. A 47-year-old female IT professional worker said, "I love to read **friends' recommendations**, because **close and true friends** recommend only the brands which are best for us. I do not take orientation from **other influencers** which are not known to me". Participants seldom showed an interest in products until their friends shared their experiences of them. Most of these interviewees stated that their close friends, who they have known for many years, are trustworthy sources with respect to buying fashion. For example, a 45-year-old housewife said, "I

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3 don't have trust in brand information which is shared by anyone else other than my close friends,
4 because (I am aware that) there are **paid influencers** too".

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7 Most respondents believe that social media provides a platform for people to share their
8 views and experiences with friends and family about brands. A 40-year-old mother had
9 the following point of view: *"When I plan to buy something new for my kids, because kids require
10 more than us, I first check recommendations from my friends, or I go on to purchase items
11 produced by the brand from which my friends have already purchased, because **I can trust only**
12 **my close friends**, more than my friends on Facebook. Because my close friends are very honest
13 with me, and I believe that, especially my family friends".* Further, some participants were less
14 likely to believe a paid advertisement which may be generated by unknown influencers.
15 A 34-year-old housewife explained why she trusts brand recommendations made by
16 people that are known to her: *"I personally believe that a brand advertisement is created by
17 the brand itself, so it has less influence on me and other people. Therefore, I only consider
18 advertisements to be a source which provides information. However, recommendations are only
19 perceived when the information comes from **trustworthy friends or family** through social media
20 because they know me, and we know them; or information comes from those who have **experienced**
21 **the product** by paying for it from their wallets".*

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34 **Subtheme 2: Fashion UGC expert**

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36 **Keywords:** uploading, expertise, customizing pictures, good description, likes,
37 comments.

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39 Some SMUs unintentionally purchase fashion brands after reading a recommendation
40 from Fashion UGC experts who are strong influencers. Influencers create and share
41 relevant material by giving information support and there are friends or friends of friends
42 who feel that it is their social responsibility to guide others so that they can save their
43 resources and take optimal purchase decisions. Also, it was found that when fashion
44 brand-related content has been shared by close social ties (i.e. multiple close friends) it
45 has more credibility and influence on purchase intentions. A 34-year-old housewife said,
46 *"although I personally feel shy about displaying my pictures in different clothes on social media,*
47 *a friend of mine (X) is really **good at uploading her pictures** on social media in different dresses".*
48 Some participants highlighted that their friends have better shopping experiences and
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3 expertise; these friends love to take pictures of their purchase brands and share them
4 frequently on social media with details about the prices and quality of products. Findings
5 have shown that technical expertise in customising brand pictures online also appeals to
6 SMUs. A 39-year-old male business owner said, *“I think the **expertise of sharing and making***
7 *things for different friends is something special. My friends A, B and C are more active and*
8 *competent **customising their pictures along with well-written descriptions.** Therefore, their*
9 *shared things always get more **likes and comments** than my posts”*. It was also found that a
10 good quality picture or video positively influences the audience. Participants stated that
11 sharing attractive pictures or audio must be included in the brand recommendations of
12 content generators. Additionally, language skills, such as well-written and organised
13 brand posts, are identified as attractive because of the content and title, and an interesting
14 mixture of pictures and videos supports the enhancement of brand engagement.
15 Therefore, the researchers summarise that brand awareness, language, suitability of
16 colour and size, and technological expertise in customising and taking pictures are
17 considered significant and influential characteristics by SMUs.
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30 Subtheme 3: Relevance

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32 **Keywords:** circumstances and plans, budget, same income, other similarities, kids
33 shopping, save from hassle, recommendation from friends, style, choices, professional,
34 peer suggestions, social needs, professional status.
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38 Relevance is linked to similarities in people’s demographics, professions, lifestyles or
39 economic conditions that make it more possible for them to initiate brand
40 recommendations to those who share the same traits. For example, a 24-year-old male
41 student said: *“I am more likely to ask my friends, and even friends of my friends about pre-*
42 *purchase information on WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook groups. Based on the information my*
43 *friends provide me, I can decide what to purchase based on my **circumstances and plans,** such as*
44 *travelling, time, and **budget** amongst other things”*. Similarly, a 25-year-old female student
45 *stated: “I am a student and prefer to get recommendations from those friends who are the same*
46 *age, have the **same disposable income, and other similarities.** My friends prefer to purchase*
47 *fashion brands which are durable as well as available at economical prices”*.
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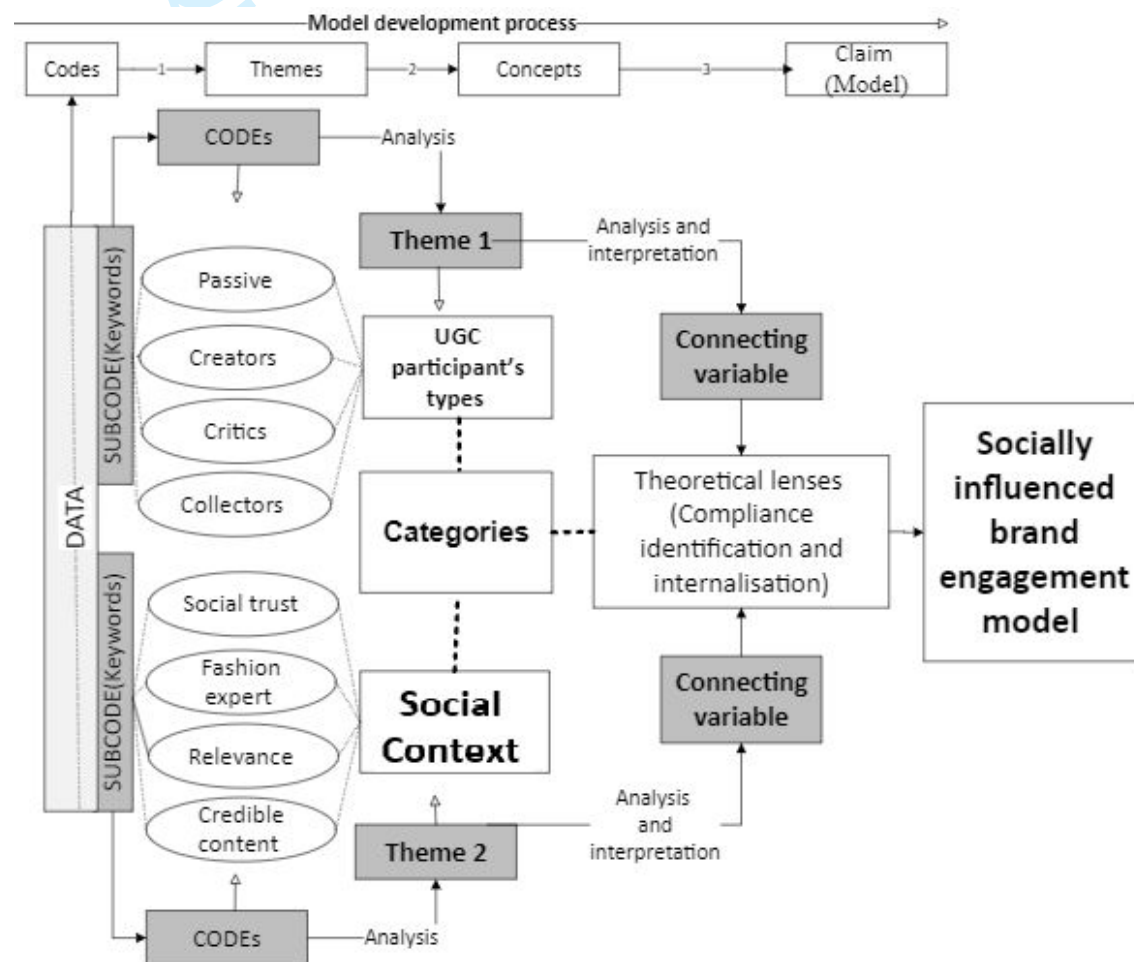
Homemakers tend to take suggestions from their friends who earn a similar income, and who can therefore provide more focussed information about brands, whereas some people follow ideals because they aspire towards their lifestyles. For example, a 35-year-old housewife said, *"I really like to share my **kids' shopping** with my friends because they also have kids. In this way, we give and get recommendations from each other which help us to **save time and hassle** when buying kids' clothes"*. The present study found that SMUs usually perceive brand-related content to be highly trustworthy, and valuable in terms of brand engagement when it is shared by friends and family members, rather than by brand channels through advertisements on social media platforms. For example, one of the interviewees revealed that close friends engage with and influence their purchase decisions: *"when I plan to buy something new for my kids, because kids require more than us, I first check **recommendations from my friends**, or I purchase items produced by the brand from which my friends have already purchased because I can trust only my close friends, more than friends on Facebook. Because my close friends are very honest with me and I believe that, especially my family friends"*. A 27-year-old housewife said: *"I believe (it is useful) to get brand user experiences from many close friends as they are always involved in buying from brands which match **my style, budget and choices**"*.

A 27-year-old housewife said, *"I am a busy housewife and on a tight budget, so I ask for family shopping suggestions from my friends who have the **same lifestyle and budget**"*. Participants also pointed out the social reputation of the influencers and explained that they were likely to be believed if they discussed their own experience rather than promoted specific brands. Participants also mentioned that when they came across a recommendation from an influencer, they only regarded it as trustworthy and credible if they were familiar with the influencer and the brand's reputation in the market.

Most participants were of the view that, if a brand is popular amongst their peers, then their engagement and intention to purchase is increased. Some were attracted to brands which fulfil their professional needs. A 26-year-old male professional worker said: *"I am a **professional**, and I love to choose specific and fast fashion therefore I love to take **my peers' suggestions** for brand buying"*. A 25-year-old male professional noted: *"For a long time, I have dreamed of having a highly paid job and wearing a three-piece, branded suit (produced by brand A) on the first day of my new job. Now, wearing this suit feels to me like my dream has come*

true. I am truly engaged with the brand (A). A long time ago I got information about this brand when I was watching a video on how to tie a tie". A 35-year-old male business consultant stated: "My job designation is **professional**, so I love to dress for my **social and professional needs and status**, and therefore I wear popular brands which are known by everyone".

Figure 1: Model development process



Discussion

SMUs connect with each other so that they may know which fashion brands are socially trendy or what is in a fashion wave. The sharing of UGC provides SMUS with opportunities to know which fashion brands are appropriate, affordable, durable and easily accessible. Some SMUs believed that UGC sharing is caring because it creates a sense of responsibility with the purpose of highlighting information about those brands

which meet customers' expectations. Other SMUs believed that sharing is caring because it is helpful to know the good and bad experiences of customers, which can lead to optimal purchase decisions. Findings reveal that SMUs gather brand-related knowledge with the help of various social media features, such as sponsored ads, official brand pages on social media, advertisement ads and Facebook groups, where people share information about brands that are special to them. Additionally, social proof occurs as a result of UGC consumption among SMUs, and UGC consumption happens in a social context where identification and internalisation social influence were generated. Therefore, this research suggests that marketers listen to SMUs' comments about their brand with the purpose to improve SICBE.

This study differentiates between social and consumer brand engagement with the application of social influence theory. It identifies that internalisation can enhance social engagement, but that compliance influence can develop and enhance consumer brand engagement. The second contribution is that this study applies and extends social influence theory in the context of SICBE through social media platforms. For example, experts, acting as opinion leaders, exert influence which can develop and enhance social brand engagement at individual levels. Experts and crowds are key factors at a collective level which can enhance social brand engagement. However, these factors cannot convert people into buyers. Therefore, this study identifies separate factors for consumer brand engagement, such as discount offers, social ties and trust, and relevancy. These are some of the factors which can develop and enhance consumer brand engagement. SMUs generate content based on their own social intentions and motivations.

According to Naeem and Ozuem (2020), people are engaged with those UGC creators who create blogs, discussion forums, videos, pictures and audio. These creators can influence the behaviour of the audience of UGC (Daugherty et al., 2008). However, this study explains that UGC creation and exchange are not only limited to creators. There are many UGC participants who socially engage with fashion brands' audiences, such as content creators, critics and collectors/consumers. Previous studies only focused on exploring the benefits of social media platforms in the context of seeking advice for taking best possible decision with respect to products or services selection (Liu et al., 2019;

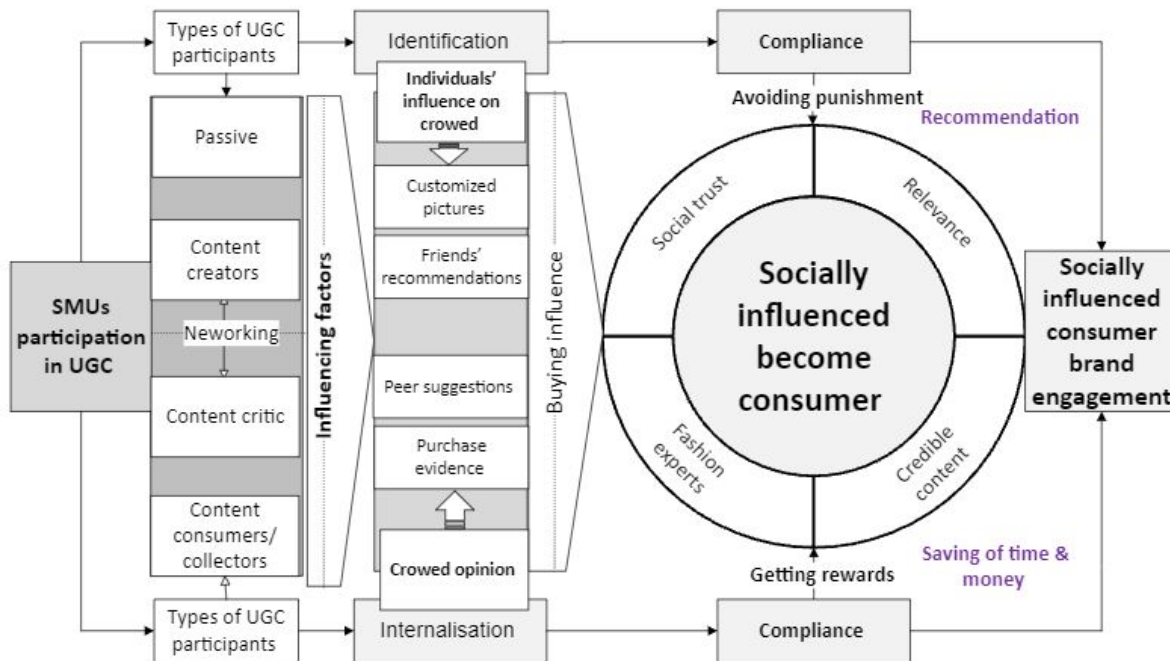
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3 Naeem and Ozuem, 2021a), but this study explained that SMUs are involved in creating,
4 exchanging, acknowledging and consuming UGC related to those fashion brands in which
5 they are interested. For example, content creators are highly involved in sharing brands-
6 related content with their friends, friends of friends, family members and online local
7 community on Facebook, which helps to increase engagement with brands. Furthermore,
8 critics can create logical arguments by using purchase receipts, correspondence emails,
9 pictures of brand products, and logical reasons that can either engage or disengage
10 SMUs from fashion brands. Therefore, this study can provide fruitful insights that can
11 generate direction for fashion brand managers regarding how they can enhance SICBE
12 for fashion brands and further increase their revenue using social media platforms.
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21 Previous studies revealed that consumers who publicise brand content (e.g., especially
22 those consumers who have purchased and experienced the brand) not only build a
23 stronger and more appreciated identity of themselves in their networks or communities
24 (Shankar et al., 2016; So et al., 2018), but they can also positively contribute to others'
25 social engagement and brand engagement by giving positive word of mouth among
26 SMUs (Shankar et al., 2016; Ladhari et al., 2020). This study explored how different types
27 of SMUs (passive, content creators, critics and consumers) are involved in generating,
28 exchanging, reading and consuming content related to brands in which they are
29 interested. The present study revealed that critics is a category of UGC participants who
30 have purchase receipts, correspondence emails, pictures of brand products and logical
31 reasons that can inspire or demotivate existing and future consumers about fashion
32 brands. Therefore, their personal experiences can either socially engage or disengage
33 their social circle from specific fashion brands. The UGC participants who are more
34 actively involved are collectors/consumers and critics. For example, collectors are more
35 interested in finding sales, discount vouchers or deals because they are decision makers
36 for their families; therefore, they consume the UGC related to fashion brands. Content
37 creators are those who are involved in creating, sharing and exchanging content about
38 fashion brands. Furthermore, critics are those people who have had either disheartening
39 or inspiring personal shopping experiences which they generate and share with the
40 purpose to warn and advise others.
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The current study found that people love to take brand-related information from those who have similar demographics, profession, lifestyle and economic condition; therefore, they can initiate brand recommendations based on their knowledge, expertise and shopping experience. According to a previous study, most companies which advertise or publish brand-related content on social media lack relevance to targeted customers (Schultz, 2017). Participants who are homemakers revealed that they preferred to listen to the personal recommendations of their friends (i.e., close friends as well as homemakers). For example, if a homemaker purchases a fashion brand's children's garments, then they can recommend them to their close friends (e.g. another homemaker who may have the same economic condition and choices). Other participants love to follow the lifestyle and choices of endorsers because their lifestyle and personality is relevant and ideal for them. Furthermore, office workers who are parents can easily refer to those fashion brands which are in their affordability range as well as suited to the working requirements of an office. Other participants (e.g. students) argued that they prefer to act upon recommendations from close friends (other students). One of the reasons for this is that a majority of students are looking for fashion brands that are economical and durable. Therefore, relevance is also one of the major factors of social influence. According to Munar and Jacobsen (2013), the importance, relevance and influence of brand-related content increasingly enables potential customers to make brand purchase decisions.

Contribution

Figure 2: Socially influenced consumer brand engagement



There are many studies that have explored social media influence on buying decisions (Godey et al., 2016; Mandler et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019), but there is limited understanding regarding what types of UGC participants create and enhance social influence specifically for fashion brands. This study provides understanding about the social motivations which can enhance the involvement of UGC participants in UGC creation, exchange and consumption. The social influence theory of Kelman (1958) is limited to understanding social influence among the social actors of society. However, this study extends our understanding of the different types of social actors (i.e., content creator, content critic, content collectors, and passive) on social media platforms that can generate, exchange and enhance the social and consumer brand engagement (SICBE). For example, content creators have shared that they are involved because they want to enhance the overall wisdom of the crowd by sharing data about specific brands which are providing quality and affordable prices. They usually create and share audios, videos, posts and pictures which can attract and enhance SICBE for fashion brands. Typically, this form of social influence is known as classical identification, as people in such relationships take over others' role or it may lead to the development of reciprocal role relationships through sharing, showing and communicating the same opinion and interest. People believe in changes they bring to their behaviour through identification no matter

whether the content is relevant or irrelevant; they share and communicate because of the source of the UGC. Such behaviour is induced because of its association with required relationship and this shows that identification derives satisfaction through conforming act.

This research contributes to understanding UGC social interaction and exchange through which individuals bring changes to their behaviour in accordance with demands of societal environment is called social influence towards fashion brands. There are different types of UGC participants like passive, content creators, content critics, and content consumers who can exert identification, internalisation and compliance influence on SMUs. For example, it was found that content creators who have professional experience, high knowledge, personal shopping experiences and social reputation can enhance internalisation and identification among those who are engaged with them. Findings reveal that people love to share the wisdom of content creators and critics in their social network because it can generate other people's views as well as be helpful to take optimal decision with respect to the brands in which they are interested. Other participants revealed that they love to cross-check brand-related content through different social media platforms because it may be helpful to gather the overall thoughts of different SMUs with respect to the brands in which they are interested. Overall, the exploration of UGC participants' views provides in-depth understanding to brand managers about the many types of social influencers who exist on social media and which social influencers (i.e. close friends, family members, and well-known experts) are socially trustable and able to develop SICAB. Figure 2 shows the SICBE that is developed based on the findings of this study.

According to Figure 2, compliance occurs when people accept an influence with the hope of getting favourable reactions from others who are socially trustable, reliable and relevant (i.e., close friends and family members). According to Kelman (1958, p. 53), "*Compliance can be said to occur when an individual accepts influence because he hopes to achieve a favourable reaction from another person or group. He adopts the induced behaviour not because he believes in its content but because he expects to gain specific rewards or approval and avoid specific punishments or disapproval by conforming. Thus, the satisfaction derived from compliance is due to the social effect of accepting influence*".

This shows that compliance derives satisfaction through social influence of accepting effect of social trust, accuracy of the UGC, and relevance of social ties. In contrast, identification occurs when people accept an influence with a desire to develop or sustain a self-defining satisfactory relationship with other individuals like social influencers, and industry experts. In a nutshell, this study extends our understanding that close friends, who can be professionals, industry experts and knowledgeable people, through social engagement can enhance their social circle's intention to buy fashion brands.

The major practical contribution of this research is that it provided understanding about the three categories of social influence: compliance, identification, and internalisation. Therefore, brand managers can analyse their brand's social influence types; for example, if any fashion brand already has enough social proof in the form of identification and internalisation that can create social engagement with the fashion brand, then the brand needs to transfer social brand engagement into consumer brand engagement. In that case, the fashion brand needs to create compliance social influence, which requires trust, homophily, social ties, content credibility and discount offers information exchange through social media that may generate consumer brand engagement through social exchange of UGC. This research also provided knowledge about different types of social influence, the process of social influence and the different roles of social actors for consumer brand engagement with fashion brands that can be used by practitioners in the form of said strategies.

This study has specified different types of SMUs: passive, content creator, content critic, content collector/consumer; so, brand managers can focus on SMUs who are involved in content creation, exchange and consumption, which can ultimately influence SICBE. For example, some content creators have developed a specific group or act as opinion leader/fashion brand experts on Facebook pages and they create, share or exchange fashion brand-related content which can enhance SICBE. If brand managers engage these influencers by sending information updates and other customer experiences with proof, then these influencers are likely to create more accurate UGC which can lead to fashion brands purchase decisions. This study also provided knowledge to brand managers that friends and family members are the social sources who can create the

most socially credible content, which can convert social brand engagement into consumer brand engagement. This study also indicated to marketers that people are more socially engaged with social sources who share some common needs, such as students and their budget, professionals and workplace clothing, and parents and children's clothing, so marketers could design their social media marketing strategies such that they target these specific people and their social networks.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study employed only one data collection tool (semi-structured interviews) with consumers of fashion brands. Although a social constructionist epistemological position can facilitate the involvement of a researcher to understand and elaborate subjective realities, it cannot facilitate predictions. Future studies can employ both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods to provide in-depth understanding as well as test the external validity of the model (Aslam et al., 2018; Axinn and Pearce, 2006). The use of mixed methods can overcome the issues of both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis methods. The use of mixed methods can further increase the sample size, especially using a quantitative data collection method, to test the validity of the model using confirmatory factor analysis (Aslam et al., 2018; Axinn and Pearce, 2006). The use of mixed methods and data collection from both consumers and managers of fashion brands can provide richer subjective understanding and further confirm the use of the SICBE model in future studies. Future studies can increase the range of fashion brands as well as the sample size of fashion brand consumers with the purpose to extract more in-depth understanding and rich insights for UGC participants and social influence factors that can develop and increase SICBE.

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Appendix 1: Interview participants

No	Age	Gender	Active social media account	Active instant massaging apps	Occupation
1	18-25	M	3	2	Student
2		F	3	2	Student
3		M	2	3	Professional
4		M	2	1	Business owner
5		F	2	3	Professional female
6		M	1	3	Office worker
7		F	3	2	Housewife
8		M	5	3	Student
9	26-35	M	1	3	Professional worker
10		F	2	2	Student
11		M	4	3	Marketing consultant
12		F	1	4	Housewife
13		M	2	4	Student
14		F	2	3	Mom
15		F	2	2	Housewife
16		M	3	1	Business owner
17		F	2	1	Student
18		M	1	1	Marketing consultant
19		F	1	2	Professional lady
20		F	1	3	Business owner
21		M	1	2	Business consultant
22		M	2	1	Office worker
23		F	2	3	Housewife
24		F	3	3	Housewife
25	36-45	F	3	2	Mom
26		F	3	1	Marketing consultant
27		M	1	2	Housewife
28		M	1	3	Marketing consultant
29		M	1	4	Business owner
30	46-55	M	1	3	Professional worker
31		F	3	3	IT professional

32		M	2	3	Office worker
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APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Q1: What you think are the most significant aspects of social media platforms when you gather pre-purchase information about fashion products?

Q2: Assuming that you want to buy a fashion product, what are the most important factors that can influence your point of view about brands, and your intention towards fashion brands?

Q3: Assuming that you want to buy a fashion product, who are some important individuals that can influence your buying decisions on social media platforms?

Q4: To what extent do product reviews, brand stories, and the experiences of social media users influence your purchase decisions in terms of fashion products?

Q5: How often have you decided to share information about fashion products after reading positive experiences posted by your friends on social media?

Q6: Suppose you find negative product reviews related to your favourite fashion product, do you still want to purchase that product or not?

Q7: How often you decided to purchase a fashion product because either your close friends or relatives endorse that product on a social media site?

Q8: Suppose you purchased a fashion product, and you liked its features, do you then want to share positive product experiences/reviews on your social media groups?

Q9: Suppose you purchased a fashion product, and you disliked its features; how often do you want to share negative product reviews to your social network?